

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY © 2006 THE POETRY FOUNDATION WEBSITE: WWW.AMERICANLIFEINPOETRY.ORG CONTACT: ALP@POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG

American Life in Poetry: Column 080

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

One of poetry's traditional public services is the presentation of elegies in honor of the dead. Here James McKean remembers a colorful friend and neighbor.

Elegy for an Old Boxer

From my window
I watch the roots of a willow
push your house crooked,
women rummage through boxes,
your sons cart away the TV, its cord
trailing like your useless arms.
Only weeks ago we watched the heavyweights,
and between rounds you pummeled the air,
drank whiskey, admonished "Know your competition!"
You did, Kansas, the '20s
when you measured the town champ
as he danced the same dance over and over:
left foot, right lead, head down,
the move you'd dreamt about for days.
Then right on cue your hay-bale uppercut
compressed his spine. You know. That was that.
Now your mail piles up, RESIDENT circled
"not here." Your lawn goes to seed. Dandelions
burst in the wind. From my window
I see you flat on your back on some canvas,
above you a wrinkled face, its clippy bow tie
bobbing toward ten. There's someone behind you,
resting easy against the ropes,
a last minute substitute on the card you knew
so well, vaguely familiar, taken for granted,
with a sucker punch you don't remember
ever having seen.

Reprinted from "Headlong," University of Utah Press, 1987, by permission of the author. First published in "Prairie Schooner," Vol. 53, No. 3, (Fall 1979). Copyright © 1979 by James McKean, whose latest book is nonfiction, *Home Stand: Growing up in Sports*, Michigan State University Press, 2005. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress, and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

American Life in Poetry ©2006 The Poetry Foundation
Contact: alp@poetryfoundation.org
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.